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ABSTRACT

Western philosophy has not had much to say about listening or receptive communication until fairly recently, and listening research has tended either to follow the trends of the speech communication field or to be directed by speech science or the pragmatics of the working world. A study examines the process of understanding and interpretation presented in the area of hermeneutics and interprets it for researchers of listening. The twentieth-century hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophers, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Gadamer are scrutinized for their contributions to listening research and for indications of paths to follow in future investigations. Listening, the receptive dimension of discourse, is generally a "place" of primary mediation between conversants in discourse; the listener participates in the mediation of meaning--and hence of the situation. The listener metaphorically sits at the doorway between self and other, aware of and creating both worlds. Thus, the concept of a productive listening process is derived from hermeneutics. Research should look at communications in terms of what happens in the interpretive process, how linguistic meaning is shaped, and what this tells us of human actors. (NKA)

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CONTRIBUTIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS TO LISTENING RESEARCH

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CONTRIBUTIONS OF PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS TO LISTENING RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

Listening research has tended to follow the trends of the speech communication field or to be directed by speech science or the pragmatics of the working world. This study locates philosophical roots for listening which are uniquely its own in the work of the major 20th century hermeneutic philosophers, Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, Ricoeur, Gadamer. Evidence is discovered for listening as the basis of human orientation in discourse and the life-context, and listening is conceptualized as the mediating force in human interaction, fusing the situations of the communicators.

Western Philosophy did not have much to say about listening or receptive communication until fairly recently. There are a few brief exceptions, among them St. Augustine's quote to the effect that: ...what you expect is what you receive. The Greeks were concerned with speaking, the Romans similarly, the Middle Ages aside from Augustine's quote emphasized church speaking and letter writing, the Renaissance reemphasized the Greeks and gave a new grounding to logic as the foundation of speaking. It was not until the 17th century and the serious emphasis on perception that there was much hope of serious philosophical concern with listening. Even then the emphasis on perception was tied to either sense data or intuitions and did not seem to relate to the actual process of listening.

Even after the turn of this century, most philosophical study of perception had not addressed listening. Previous study considered perception as the result of either objective impressions which we could never know, or subjective sense data which could never give us a "real" view of the world "out there." The first view was/is empirical realism, the second, ideal romanticism. Neither addressed itself to the interpretive process that happens when listening takes place. Both were bound up with "one side" of the subjective/objective dichotomy and missed the interactive and integral nature of communication.

What's more empirical research insisted upon, and continues to insist upon, quantifiable constructs and variables. It looks for <u>things</u> which can be exactly characterized and predicted. Listening is not a thing, it cannot be observed <u>per se</u>, and hence does not lend itself to empirical observation. Listening is a process that happens in the interpretive interaction of communication. It is a continuous process that does not terminate with the end of a statement from the speaker but continues "internally" akin to the thought process as we monitor ourselves

responding to the speaker "overtly" or "covertly". It is because of the emphasis on quantitative methodology, I think, that we have waited until the development of qualitative/interpretive methods to begin the study of listening. Interpretive research better understands the interpretive process of listening.(1)

With the above as background, I would like to discuss some of the work from hermeneutic and phenomenological philosophy that can serve as a significant contribution to research in listening. I chose these areas because I felt they dealt most with interpretation and would be most productive. First, I need to express my frustration with most philosophers, even in the Speech Communication field, who continue to address the expressive, centrifugal dimension of communication. I use "dimension" to indicate a perspective of "reality" equivalent to and consonant with other perspectives of "reality", such as the receptive, centripetal dimension of listening. That is, there is no attempt on my part to extract listening from the seamless-interactive flow of communication. To the contrary, I hope to keep present a sense of atunement to the actual experience of listening.

In the contemporary literature of philosophy Searle speaks of "speech acts", the existentialists discuss "speaking". In the Speech Communication field we have "discourse analysis" which with rare exceptions (see Hopper)(2) deals with speaking, and expression rather than reception. Other work, for example, some of the master's session papers (3) from the 1985 ICA conference in Hawaii on paradigms concerns themselves with speaking as do so many others. The point is not to belittle anyone of these papers, the work is excellent, but to point out that most of what is being done is about speaking. (To be fair I must note Dance and Larson's functional theory (4), which seems to allow for receptive communication, though it never mentions listening).

Why? I think part of the reason lies with methodology being biased toward methods ill-suited to understanding non-observable, interpretive phenomena (events). Listening does have observable indicators of its interpretive process , but much of what happens relies upon sense-making shaped by the linguistic/cultural parameters existing in the situation. Part of the problem may also be a Western, Civilizational predilection for control. Listening has not been perceived as influential, as helpful in managing and controlling one's environment, though I and a few others have explored the issue and feel otherwise (see Rogers and Farson) (5). Listening has historically and practically been perceived and conceptualized as passive and hence not of value in exerting influence, and so unimportant to success in Western Civilization. In the culture, generally, we often command others to "listen up", "pay attention", "unplug your ears", as if we needed some external order to force us to listen or attend. In fact, the Germanic root of the word listen has the primary meaning of "to obey". Parents still tell children to listen when they "mean" obey.

So, where then do we turn for fertile soil in which to plant the seeds of future listening research? We must begin with some broad philosophical examination of why listening has not received the treatment it deserves. Don Idhe in Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound, (6, p.3-15), clearly develops how historically, sound was given a secondary role by Aristotle, Plato and others. Aristotle found vision to be more objective and Plato speaking for the Greeks "harbored . . . a suspicion of the voice"(5, p.14). Hence, Idhe declaims: "But if the world is devocalized, then what is to become of listening?"(5, p.15). We need therefore, to begin with a fundamental study of auditory phenomena and listening. Idhe does such a study of listening and I have described this in another paper (7) Ihde's work, however, is concerned with the basic experience of sound and needs to be extended to cover the interpersonal process of listening or interpretation.

Some of the blame for listening not being more fairly considered also rests with the very first stage of theory development which begins with "phenomena." The etymology of the word is Greek, literally meaning how things appear or show themselves in light. In Physics, from whence we derive much of our theoretical methodology, phenomena means to be observable, to appear. The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as what is real to the senses, but as indicated above according to Idhe's study, the primary sense in Western Culture is vision.

F. Joseph Smith has suggested (8) that what we should be studying is not the "appearance" of things, but rather the "sound" of things, audial experience. Smith has expanded phenomenology to include audial experience and called it akumenology, which is more appropriate for the concerns of those studying listening. That is not to say that we should ignore visual experience, the senses are globally tied together and to ignore audial experience would be to miss relationships with visual and other sense experience. In studying listening, however, we need to give more attention to audial imagery and audial experience, akumenon specifically. I think that to a degree we have reified listening, frozen our evaluation of it, and missed its essential experiential nature.

Let us then, take these presuppositions as prerequisite and move on to examine what phenomenological philosophy and particularly hermeneutics has to say to researchers in the field of listening. An understanding of how hermeneutics is defined offers a beginning.

A standard current definition of hermeneutics is offered by Ricoeur in Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences : "Hermeneutics is the theory of the operations of understanding in their relation to the interpretation of texts." (9, p.43) Gadamer suggests that hermeneutics has application in situations where meaning is problematical and requires interpretive effort. He says "the hermeneutical has to do with bridging the gap between the

familiar world in which we stand and the strange meaning that resists assimilation into the horizons of our world."(10, p.xii) This latter sense of hermeneutics has to do with "breaches in intersubjectivity," with interpersonal communication and the manner in which meaning is mediated by understanding, and hence by listening as an interpretive process.

Historically, the earliest sense of hermeneutics had to do with bibical text interpretation. Hermeneutics was later transformed to deal with the concerns of many problems of interpretation and understanding using the "text" as an analogue for the phenomena studied. (It may be an analogue for interpersonal communication, for instance.) Dilthey, Ricoeur and others have explored the concept of understanding as it relates to the basic methodology of the social sciences. Ricoeur sees human behavior as beginning with discourse and the interpretive process that takes place between "text" and reader, or more fundamentally speakers in discourse, but also indicates the importance of the larger historical situation as important in the interpretation of understanding in human affairs. For Ricoeur, this method of study provides distance from historical events and thus a broader, more encompassing view.

There are actually only a few references to the listener in all of the literature of hermeneutics I have explored. The major referents are to the speaker as the generator of meaning in discourse, the text as problematic, or more broadly as a text analogue (an event) to be understood. A lot of the literature focuses on the text and how it is interpreted, and on the process of understanding. Although this process of understanding, particularly in Ricoeur, becomes "disembodied," or abstract, there is much here which can be interpreted as relevant for listening. At times listening may be substituted directly for understanding but it is always the essential interpretive act which contributes to understanding, and it makes sense for our purposes. The approach of this study, then, will be to take the process of understanding (and interpretation which brings understanding) presented in the area of hermeneutics and make sense of it for researchers of listening.

An historical approach indicates the various emphases given to the hermeneutical enterprise and we will use it to indicate the transformation of thought from bibical text interpretation of Schleiermacher and Dilthey to Gadamer and Ricoeur who ground their philosophies in discourse as the beginning essence of understanding.

Linge, in his introductory essay to Gadamer's Philosophical Hermeneutics, indicates how with Schleiermacher there was a shift in the direction of what hermeneutics was supposed to be. (9, p.xii) For bibical scholars the purpose of hermeneutics was the study of lack of understanding. Schleiermacher, and also Dilthey, emphasized the "natural priority of misunderstanding" with the consequence that "understanding must be intended and sought at

each point" least we fall prey to prejudice or distortion. It was hence natural to error in listening/understanding, and hence one had to be on guard and aware at all times. Some of our contemporary approaches to listening (e.g., General Semantics) take this stand, with the effect that in listening we must work to be self-correcting if we are to be effective.

Schleiermacher and Dilthey then, had declared that the interpreter's situation can have only a negative value. The interpreter/listener must transcend the situation and hence the prejudices and distortion that block valid understanding. Gadamer later pointed this out and emphasized the effect of situation in a constructive manner. Dilthey stressed the psychological in his hermeneutics; who said something was more important than what was said. He also stressed lived experience but stated that: "Man learns about himself only through the exteriorisation of his life and through the effects it produces on others." (8, p.52) Since listening per se cannot be exteriorized (we can only observe the manifestations), it seems with Dilthey as well as many others, the focus of hermeneutics is on discourse or the broader notion of understanding.

Although Dilthey's psychologizing was an attempt to set hermeneutics up as an "objective" foundation of the social sciences comparable to the physical sciences, he was also concerned with communication as "being-with." Ricoeur and Gadamer would later take note of this in their respective conceptualizations of interpretation as mediation. Heidegger on the other hand moved toward "being-in-the-world" and shattered the "pretension of the knowing subject to set itself up as the measure of objectivity." (8, p.56) Hence, the misunderstanding of Schleiermacher dependent upon transcending the situation was no longer valid. We as subjects, far from being transcendent, are grounded irrevocably in the situation. We are rooted in the situation as a pregiven, even as we orient ourselves through discourse. And so for Heidegger :

The first function of understanding is to orientate us in a situation. So understanding is not concerned with grasping a fact but with apprehending a possibility of being.(8, p.56)

uSubstituting listening for understanding we might say then that listening unfolds the possibilities of discourse as sketched out by the "text"/speaker. So listening/understanding explicates and offers articulation to meaning in a situation. Dilthey's concept of being-with, discourse, is situated "in the structure of being, rather than situating the latter in discourse."(8, p.57) "Discourse or talking is the way in which we articulate 'significantly' the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world." and "Hearing and keeping silent are possibilities belonging to discursive speech." (11, p.204) "Hence," Ricoeur concludes:

the first determination of saying [existential constitution] is not speaking, but rather the couple hearing/keeping silent. Here

again Heidegger goes against our ordinary, and even linguistic, way of giving priority to the process of speaking (locution, interlocution).

Saying,for Heidegger, does not refer then to speaking but to the constitution of the existential situation, Being-in-the-world. In a nutshell, "Hearing is constitutive of discourse." (10, p.206) "Listening to . . . is Dasein's existential way of Being-open as Being-with for Others." (10, p.206) Listening articulates meaning in discourse with others and more fundamentally, the meaning/understanding that is articulated arises out of the individual's (Dasein's) rootedness in its situation, Being-in-the-world, its life-context. And further Heidegger says "Being-with develops in listening to one another...." (10, p.206) Listening grounds us in our situation and maintains our relationships with others.

About keeping silent, which has the "same existential foundation as discourse", Heidegger states:

In talking with another, the person who keeps silent can 'make one understand' (that is, he can develop an understanding), and he can do so more authentically than the person who is never short of words.(10, p.208)

Heidegger amplifies the importance of Davis' (1972) first commandment of listening, "stop talking," and he stresses that understanding (listening) has an influence on the other to whom we listen.

Developments in hermeneutics after Heidegger have come primarily from Gadamer and Ricoeur. Both cull the history of the hermeneutic enterprise and extend this work with significant additions which have much to say about communication. One strand of their work emphasizes the constructive influence of prejudice and distortion. Ricoeur argues:

Hermeneutics has simply to raise this notion of understanding, initially applied to the exegesis of texts, to the level of a general theory of prejudices. ... Just as mis-understanding is a fundamental structure of exegesis (Schleiermacher), so too prejudice is a fundamental structure of communication in its social and institutional forms. (8, p.110)

Prejudice makes interpretation, possible but prejudice is not a subjective interpretation. The task of hermeneutics is not to deal with the psychology of the author (the speaker), "but to unfold, in front of the text, the 'world' which opens up and discloses." (8, p.111) It is the 'matter' of the con-versation which determines the context and more fundamentally it is the listening, the silence, which through broader understanding bounds our existence.

Gadamer takes the boundedness to situation with prejudices and distortions "to be the productive ground of all understanding rather than the negative factors or impediments to overcome." Prejudice then plays a positive constructive role and "constitutes the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are the biases of our openness to the world." (9, p.9) Understanding/listening is a productive and intentional experience; however, listening does not reconstruct in the process of understanding, it rather mediates. Rather than shaping meaning from our own experience, listening shapes meaning actively through the interaction of self with others.

Mediation as a concept is developed by both Ricoeur and Gadamer, but Gadamer does the most to describe communication as mediation. Communication "is a process of 'presencing,' that is, of mediations." (9, p.xvi) Linge expresses Gadamer's thought well and it is from his introduction to Philosophical Hermeneutics that I will mostly draw in the following discussion of mediation. So, to paraphrase: in listening, the receptive dimension of discourse, we participate in the mediation of meaning and hence of the situation. Prejudices limit and shape our ability to self-consciously constitute meaning for self and others in the situation. We may self-consciously correct for prejudices, but we never transcend the fact that we listen from the biases (the coloring) of our history, our life-context. Listening, therefore, plays a positive mediating role in the construction of meaning.

Listening is a fusion of individual life horizons (contexts). This fusion/mediation through listening means we have an inexhaustible "source of possibilities of meaning." (9, p.xix) Mediation is a constant 'presencing' in the situation, each moment is a fluid and relative moment, both productive and disclosive. In communication we "look" with the other at what we are communicating. Horizons fuse modifying what has been said, and creating ever new possibilities through the listening/interpretive process. Further, "Collisions with the others's horizons makes us aware of assumptions so deep-seated that they would otherwise remain unnoticed." (9, p.xx)

The fusion of horizons in understanding also fuses prejudices, and in the interpretive-listening process brings us to self-awareness of our situation. For Gadamer this is essentially a linguistic process. We do not, he says, have an extra linguistic experience of the world and then translate it into language. We are conscious of no translation process that takes place in listening/interpretation. If there were such a process language would be a mere tool used by consciousness. We are rather possessed by language, or as Merleau-Ponty says, we inhabit language. Language is the condition of our presencing, to have it be a mere tool would very much limit the nature of humanity.

The act of interpretation is not then self-founding, but presupposes a linguistic tradition. Language is the world we inhabit and it is language which is transparent and disclosive of

what is said within itself. The infinite possibility of fused/mediated horizons is also the possibility of the language and hence the world. (To paraphrase Wittgenstein, the limits of my language are the limits of my world.) Every conversation has an infinity of unsaid possibilities in relation to being "into which the one who understands is drawn." (9, p.xxxii) Listening as a fundamental understanding opens up, in the interpretive process of mediation, endless opportunities for meaning. It is listening that gives substance and meaning for our life situation. Listening shapes our situation based upon the broader understanding which grounds us in existence.

There is a great deal in hermeneutics for listening research and this only a rough translation of the essence. Generally, we can say that listening is "place" of primary mediation between conversants in discourse. As we listen we metaphorically sit at the doorway between self and other aware of and creating both worlds. Listening makes present in discourse the intersubjective coordination of horizons, it discloses the possibilities of discourse, and it makes sense of what is said. From hermeneutics we derive the concept of a productive listening process. We need to look at communication situations then in terms of what happens in the interpretive process, how is linguistic meaning shaped and what does this tell us of human actors. A more thorough reading of hermeneutics will no doubt uncover further wisdom about listening.

1 Purdy, Michael. "Qualitative Research," paper presented at the International Listening Association, San Diego, March 1986

2 Hopper, Robert. "Interpretation as Coherence Production," in Conversational Coherence: Form Structure and Strategy. Robert T. Craig and Karen Tracy, editors. Sage series in Interpersonal Communication, Vol.2. Beverly Hills: Sage, 1983.

3 See, for example, Lee Thayer's paper. "A Poetic for Communication." 35th Annual Conference of the International Communication Association, Honolulu, Hawaii, May 1985.

4 Dance, Frank E.X. and Carl E. Larson. The Functions of Human Cmmunication: A Theoretical Approach. New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1976.

5 Rogers, Carl R. and Richard E. Farson. "Active Listening," in William Haney, Communication and Interpersonal Relations. Homewood, Illinois: Irwin, 1986.

6 Idhe, Don. Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976.

7 Purdy, Michael. "A Phenomenology of Listening Perception." Paper delivered at ILA conference in Orlando, March 1985. Available for the author on request.

8 Smith, F. Joseph. The Experience of Musical Sound. New York: Gordon and Breach, 1979.

9 Ricoeur, Paul. Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences. Edited and translated by John B. Thompson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.

10 Gadamer, Hans-Georg. Philosophical Hermeneutics. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.

11 Heidegger, Martin. Being and Time. Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper and Row, 1962.